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NSC FOR E. MILLARD

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [PINR](#) [PTER](#) [CE](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: Sri Lanka: Competing Muslim groups engage in
fierce infighting ahead of April 2 election

Refs: Colombo 477, and previous

(U) Classified by James F. Entwistle, Deputy Chief of
Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b, d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Muslim parties are engaged in fierce infighting ahead of the April 2 parliamentary election. Tensions are particularly high in the east, where there have been many incidents of violence between the pro-UNP Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) and Muslims who are loyal to President Kumaratunga. At this point, it is difficult to tell which party is ahead in the race, but the SLMC's campaign appears to have had difficulty picking up traction. In the meantime, Muslims in the east remain worried about the potential ramifications of the LTTE split. If the SLMC does not do well, the UNP's chances of forming the next government would be seriously impaired. END SUMMARY

¶2. (C) INFIGHTING AMONG MUSLIMS: Muslim parties are engaged in fierce infighting ahead of the April 2 parliamentary election. Tensions are particularly high in the east, where there have been many incidents of violence between the pro-United National Party (UNP) SLMC and Muslims who are loyal to President Kumaratunga. (The pro-Kumaratunga elements are divided into two camps: the National Unity Alliance, the "NUA," and a faction led by A.L.M. Athaullah, a MP who recently defected from the SLMC along with four other SLMC MPs. The Athaullah faction is running for seats on the ticket of the pro-Kumaratunga "United People's Freedom Alliance," "UPFA.") There have been a particularly high number of campaign-related incidents of violence in the eastern Batticaloa and Ampara Districts. A SLMC campaign worker was reportedly killed in one such incident on March 16, for example. If confirmed, this would be the first death related to the campaign among Muslims (and the third overall in the campaign). In the meantime, a local election monitoring group has tallied almost 80 violent incidents in the east since the campaign began, which represents a relatively high proportion of the roughly 600 reported incidents in the country as a whole.

¶3. (C) SLOW START FOR SLMC: At this point, it is difficult to tell which party is ahead in the race, but the SLMC's campaign appears to have had difficulty picking up traction. The SLMC and its leader, Rauf Hakeem, are running an active campaign in the east, where a plurality of Muslims lives. Instead of running for a seat in Kandy, where he is from, Hakeem has even decided to run from Ampara District, for example. Despite all of this, the SLMC campaign appears to have been rattled to some extent by accusations that Hakeem supports the UNP's peace process initiative too much. The NUA and the Athaullah faction have worked hard to press this point home in the east, where many Muslims are worried about the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) organization (see below). It is also the case that the campaigns of the NUA and the Athaullah faction have been hobbled to some degree by infighting between each other. At this point, there are few hard statistics to show how the parties are faring.

¶4. (C) WORRIES ABOUT LTTE SPLIT: In the meantime, Muslims in the east are very worried about the potential ramifications of the recent split in the LTTE between northern and eastern elements. Muslims have not expressed public support for either LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran or rebel eastern commander Karuna, the antagonists in the LTTE dispute. The community has deep concerns about both men, however. Karuna, for example, has been implicated in the 1990 killings of over 700 Sri Lankan policemen in the east, while Pottu Amman, the LTTE intelligence chief and a close associate of Prabhakaran's, has been linked with attacks on Muslims in the east in the past. There are some reports that some Muslims may tend to favor Karuna, believing that the split he has caused in the LTTE only helps to weaken the larger Tiger organization. Norwegian diplomatic contacts, in their role as peace process facilitators, have said that, since the split, Karuna has tried to

reach out to Muslims to ensure them that he is not a threat. All that said, Muslims are worried that possible violence between northern and eastern elements could spill over into Muslim-dominated areas in the east. (Most contacts believe that the main LTTE organization plans to wait until after the April 2 election before trying to undermine Karuna by force or otherwise. For its part, the LTTE has said it plans to use peaceful means to dislodge Karuna.)

15. (C) COMMENT: If the SLMC does not do well in the election, the UNP's chances of forming the next government would be seriously impaired. While the amount of seats held by Muslim parties in the Parliament is relatively small (the SLMC won 12 and the NUA three in the last election out of 225 seats total), Muslims could play a big role in forming the next government. If the April 2 election is close, for example, even a shift of several seats to the NUA and to the Athaullah faction could mean the difference between victory for President Kumaratunga's UPFA grouping and defeat for the UNP. END COMMENT.

16. (U) Minimize considered.

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